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ABSTRACT

This paper describes experiences with in-house evaluation, using four case examples from Child and Family Services (a social service, child welfare, and mental health agency) in a meta-evaluation model to illustrate benefits and sensitivities of the internal evaluator's role. Projects reviewed were: (1) a child sexual abuse treatment team; (2) a family day care project; (3) agency policy in response to the Tarasoff decision; and (4) a new performance appraisal system. Meta-evaluations examine variables not originally included in the evaluation design and enable the researcher to consider unintended as well as intended consequences when examining program outcomes. Meta-evaluation may be conducted to assert the relevance of in-house research and evaluation efforts and can be used to document the utility of research activities. It can also point out where the evaluator could have been more successful. Before conducting a meta-evaluation, it is necessary for the evaluator to consider several issues: (1) timing (the length of time that should elapse between completion of an evaluation and the start of the meta-evaluation); (2) unintended consequences (program evaluations can have both negative and positive unintended consequences); (3) other functions (evaluators may develop additional programs, information, etc.); (4) objectivity of the meta-evaluation; (5) costs of the evaluation and the meta-evaluation; and (6) technical and procedural concerns (evaluators' work should be of the highest standard). In-house evaluation can make essential contributions to program planning and development. It may be appropriate for in-house evaluators to do more meta-evaluations to examine the outcomes and provide models for others. (BAE)

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In-House Evaluation - Navigating the Minefield

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In-House Evaluation -

Navigating the Minefield

Abstract

Experiences with in-house evaluation, using case examples in a meta-evaluation model, illustrate the benefits and sensitivities of the internal evaluator's role. Discussion focuses on the value of such stock-taking, including questions of timing, unintended consequences, other functions served by meta-evaluations, objectivity, costs, and technical and procedural concerns.

In-House Evaluation -

Navigating the Minefield

The practice of evaluation has been shifting in recent decades to incorporate new techniques as they develop. For example, the popularity of survey research of the mid-1960s gave way to an emphasis on quasi-experimental design in the 70s, which in turn was replaced by qualitative analyses in the 80s (Eichelberger, 1986). These shifts in emphasis were made to improve utilization. A more recent development, the "convening process," regards the evaluation procedure as an interactive negotiation between evaluator and decision-maker that determines which questions to ask and which data would be comfortable and useful; the evaluators gather the information and work with the decision-makers to implement the findings. Evaluators in this process particularly need a sense of the organization's political and interpersonal climate (Eichelberger, 1986). The usefulness of the "convening process" is its application to program development.

The role of the evaluator in the "convening process," we are suggesting, is best served by an internal evaluator, whose function is different enough from the more familiar outside "objective" evaluator to provide a new perspective on methodology. This paper will describe some experiences with internal evaluations, using case examples in a meta-evaluation model, and discuss the benefits and sensitivities of the internal evaluator's role.

Background

Meta-evaluations provide the opportunity to examine variables not originally included in the evaluation design, and enable the researcher to consider unintended as well as intended consequences when examining program outcome (Sherill, 1984). As defined by Scriven (1975), meta-evaluation is the "evaluation of evaluations or evaluators." It allows evaluators time to consider

the process of their work, without which evaluations may become mechanical endeavors. Meta-evaluation is particularly important for in-house evaluators, since the results may assist them in communicating more effectively with their consumers, identifying or recognizing sources of bias, increasing the utility and efficiency of the evaluation effort, and ultimately legitimizing the role of in-house evaluation.

Meta-Evaluation

Child & Family Services is a large voluntary social service, child welfare, and mental health agency, which has had a Research Department since 1964. The department's functions include conducting practice-oriented research, assisting with program planning, and undertaking in-house and outside program evaluations.

The evaluations we conduct involve both qualitative and quantitative data and are most often formative rather than summative in nature. Thus, the methodologies advocated by Cook and Gruder (1978) for the meta-evaluation of summative evaluations do not provide appropriate models for us to follow. A more useful procedure has been adapted from Sjoberg's work (1975): to conduct meta-evaluations from the standpoint of the four main functions which evaluations may serve: measuring the achievement of agreed-upon priorities; contributing to program reform and change; changing clients or personnel; and sustaining power or structural arrangements.

Using Sjoberg's structure the four in-house projects reviewed in this meta-evaluation are as follows:

1. Child Sexual Abuse Treatment Team. The Director of the Research Department and members of the child guidance clinic staff co-authored a grant proposal to develop and train a team of clinicians, consultants, and represen-

tatives from outside agencies to provide treatment and other interventions for child sexual abuse victims and their families. Although the proposal requested money to support an evaluation effort by the Research Department, the funding source hired an evaluator from outside the agency to perform that task. The Research Department staff proceeded with an internal evaluation of this program as well, since the treatment team was a demonstration project, and under agency policy its future beyond the grant period would require a decision by the agency's Board of Directors based on the evaluation.

2. Family Day Care Project. The Family Day Care program staff, aware that it was their "turn" in the agency to have their program reviewed in some way by the Research Department, initiated this examination of aspects of a mature agency program. Staff decided that the key question they wanted answered was why there was more rapid turnover among their day care providers currently than they had previously experienced. In addition, the day care staff asked the Research Department for help in documenting client characteristics, ascertaining if these had changed in recent years, and high-lighting unique aspects of the program.

3. Tarasoff Policy. In response to an initiative by the Director of Research, a committee was formed to examine appropriate agency policy in light of the Tarasoff decision, a California Supreme Court ruling which established the obligation of a clinician to "take reasonable care to protect" the intended victim of a client who had made credible threats of serious violence. The committee was composed of the Chief of Psychology, two Program Directors, and a Research staff member.

4. Performance Appraisal Evaluation. This evaluation of a relatively new agency program was initiated by the agency administration. It asked the Re-

search Department to evaluate staff use of and satisfaction with a new Performance Appraisal system that had been in use for approximately one year.

The results of the meta evaluation in each functional area are presented in the following section (see Figure 1).

Measuring the Achievement of Agreed-Upon Goals

The Child Sexual Abuse Treatment project evaluation was complicated by the fact that the team was composed of people who did not ordinarily work together - therapists, supervisors, program directors, an internal evaluator, and outside consultants - which tended to make members wary and guarded. In addition, the team's coordinating committee had to negotiate two evaluation plans, one to meet the needs of the funding source and the other for the internal evaluation that would eventually go to the agency's Board of Directors. Negotiating the goals with the outside evaluator, who had her own ideas about what should be achieved, proved so difficult that an internal evaluation plan was never formally agreed upon, although components of it were discussed and successfully completed. Nonetheless, the meta-evaluation revealed that the most useful data for documenting the achievement of project goals came out of this internal evaluation.

In contrast, the process of agreeing upon goals whose achievement would be measured was more straightforward in the other three projects. The Family Day Care Program was a well-established agency program whose staff had carefully identified concerns they wanted clarified by the evaluation effort. For the researcher working on this project, the lines of authority were clear and the negotiation, which centered on making the evaluation realistic and feasible, went smoothly. The conduct of the evaluation also proceeded to everyone's

satisfaction. However, this process of meta-evaluation has made it clear that several interesting and potentially worthwhile macro-level program development issues were neglected (e.g., the role of day care in meeting the needs of the community, a comparison of the agency's philosophy of day care with that of others, and a detailed cost analysis of the program). These, as well as other issues, were not pursued, in part because the researcher was working with time and budget constraints, and in part because the evaluation plan had to be tailored to the overriding interest of program and administrative staff, namely to reinforce the agency's support of the day care program. This political expediency was necessary to maintain the cooperation of the staff in order to ensure successful implementation of the evaluation findings.

The Tarasoff policy committee, on which the Research Department had its representative, was formed to take appropriate action in view of the legal decision. Initial discussion among committee members centered on the researcher's proposal to conduct an agency-wide assessment of clinical and procedural issues raised by the Tarasoff decision. Again, as in the Family Day Care project, the in-house evaluator had to be responsive to program directors' and administrators' concerns in the development of the specific questionnaire items. However, the meta-evaluation did not reveal any negative consequences of these constraints and the measurement of agreed-upon priorities was successfully completed.

The Performance Appraisal evaluation had, as its sole client, the agency administration. The administration had committed its resources and prestige to the implementation of this appraisal system. Although the evaluator attempted to broaden the scope of the research instrument to incorporate staff concerns, this was blocked by the administration. The meta-evaluation, how-

ever, concluded that the measurement of the administration - defined priorities was successful.

Contributing to Program Change and Development

The results of this meta-evaluation show that, in three of the four programs under review, the research projects led to significant program change and development in the agency. In keeping with a formative evaluation, the Child Sexual Abuse Treatment Team research contributed to change in the demonstration project over time. For example, the evaluation was responsible for structuring the team's meetings, redirecting the team's outreach efforts, identifying alternatives that would decrease response time for some clients, and contributing to planning for the team's integration into the agency after the completion of its funding period.

The report issued by the researcher in the Family Day Care project included several recommendations based on the evaluation data. One was to develop an escrow account so that day care providers could set aside the money which they would need later to pay their taxes, and another was to raise the hourly rates paid to providers; both recommendations were put into effect at once. All the recommended program reforms were seriously explored and most were either adopted immediately or implemented subsequently.

In the Tarasoff project, as a result of the evaluation report, the committee developed a draft of explicit guidelines for staff reactions to potentially dangerous situations. The researcher also arranged for agency-wide training on assessment of, and response to, potentially violent clients. This training, too, was evaluated and led to further recommendations to continue the training process and clarify the new guidelines, illustrating the long-range effects evaluations may have.

The process of evaluating the agency's Performance Appraisal system raised staff expectations of substantive changes in the system itself. However, administrative constraints prevented the researcher from recommending any real programmatic changes. In this respect the meta-evaluation pointed to the need to develop, in any future evaluation of the Performance Appraisal system, new planning strategies if evaluators hope to be able to effect programmatic change or reform.

Changing Clients or Personnel

The periodic reports issued by the internal evaluator on the Sexual Abuse Treatment Team served to remind staff of their progress in learning about child sexual abuse (which was often forgotten in the frustration of dealing with difficult cases), and to validate this progress publicly. Further, evaluation reports demonstrated, and then made staff aware of, systematic differences between intra- and extrafamily abuse, and engaged and non-engaged clients, in the clinical treatment. The information allowed staff to change their clinical response in order to decrease the incidence of non-engagement. The evaluation reports also demonstrated the value of group treatment and identified training needs perceived by team members.

Both the Family Day Care and Tarasoff projects contributed directly to staff change. As had been requested, the research report provided the Day Care staff with data on their clients which had not been collected previously. These data contributed to staff understanding of some of the difficulties the program had encountered, for example the high proportion of clients in single parent households with very young children. Similarly, the process of distributing the Tarasoff questionnaire and reporting the results heightened awareness among the agency's clinical staff of an important area of practice which

had not been discussed explicitly. The training that was recommended in the report also led to increased knowledge among staff which was then documented in the committee's further evaluation.

The Performance Appraisal evaluation did not lead to changes in its clients, the administration. In our judgment it did contribute to agency personnel thinking more critically and analytically about the appraisal process. However, this is an impression we have gathered from comments expressed to us and has not been documented formally.

Sustaining Power or Structural Arrangements

Power arrangements may be considered in the narrow context of the program being evaluated, or in the broader context of the organization as a whole. Our review of this function of evaluation revealed mixed results. The power/structural arrangements on the Child Sexual Abuse Treatment Team were, in themselves, a source of difficulty. In this project, problems in program direction and management could not be addressed successfully, in part because the research members of the team were formally involved in both directing and evaluating the project, and thus their recommendations were sometimes viewed with suspicion by other team members. In addition, these issues of project direction and process had not been included in the initial negotiation of objectives to be measured.

The other three evaluations served, in effect, to strengthen the existing power/structural arrangements within the agency. The members of the Family Day Care program staff were the most explicit in viewing Research Department involvement as a way of strengthening their program and thus supporting the structural position of that program within the agency. The guidelines developed in the Tarasoff project, which affected all the programs within the agen-

cy, reinforced the agency hierarchy. The guidelines required that decision-making in response to an incident involving client violence would proceed from staff to supervisor to agency psychiatrist and, eventually, to Executive Director. Finally, the Performance Appraisal evaluation resulted in a "fine tuning" of the appraisal system that was deeply embedded in the power/structural arrangements of the agency. Administrative constraints prevented the evaluator from examining any issues that might have challenged those arrangements.

The meta-evaluation of this functional area has highlighted the difficulty in-house evaluators face in effectively confronting the overall structure of their employing organization. However, the results of the meta-evaluation show that smaller modifications within the organization can be achieved. Reviewing this function of evaluation, then, is helpful in contributing to an awareness of the ways organizations survive and evolve, and the general political climate in which evaluation research is conducted - both in-house and by external contract.

DISCUSSION

Meta-evaluation may be conducted to assert the relevance of in-house research and evaluation efforts, and can be used to document the utility of research activities. It can also help us understand where we could have been more successful. In embarking on a meta-evaluation, however, in-house evaluators must become comfortable with a number of issues, including the following:

Timing. In-house evaluators can be more sensitive than others to the length of time that should elapse between completion of an evaluation and the

start of the meta-evaluation. Often the uses to which reports are put and the ramifications of an evaluation continue for years after the project itself has been completed. The in-house evaluator may be in the best position to judge the time at which the meta-evaluation should be conducted. In our example, the Tarasoff meta-evaluation was particularly dependent upon the time it was conducted, because the final modifications and training had not yet been completed and evaluated.

Unintended consequences. Program evaluations, like the programs themselves, have unintended consequences (Glenwick, Stephens, & Maher, 1984; Sherrill, 1984). These consequences can occur long after the original evaluation is completed. For example, the research data gathered in the Family Day Care evaluation were used over an extended period of time in a number of successful grant applications. Further, unintended consequences of an evaluation may be unavoidable, such as the hostility that developed among the clinical staff of the Child Sexual Abuse Treatment Team toward research endeavors when they were required to spend time completing data collection forms. In-house evaluators, because they are present long after the completion of the report, are particularly vulnerable to negative unintended consequences. Meta-evaluation may be useful to document positive results.

Other functions. Utilizing Sjoberg's functional formulation in a meta-evaluation model sensitized us to some essential elements of in-house evaluation, but this conceptualization is not all-inclusive. Evaluations may serve additional functions which we would urge other researchers embarking on this effort to include. For example, in-house evaluations may contribute to the development of community or interorganizational networks; such a network, for example, is a continuing consequence of the Child Sexual Abuse Treatment Team

project efforts. Other evaluations may affect knowledge or practice in the particular field or discipline investigated, as happened in the Tarasoff project. Or in-house evaluators can expand the scope of program staff's interests and outlooks, by negotiating evaluation plans that include macro level and other issues not previously considered. Other researchers may find these or additional functional categories helpful in their own meta-evaluations.

Objectivity. In-house evaluators face an exquisite dilemma in conducting meta-evaluations. How objective do we want to be when we know that this meta-evaluation will be judged by our administrators? We must also consider the reactions of other members of the agency who may recognize themselves in the description of the original evaluation project and may not agree with our characterization of their program or the political context. In addition, we are sensitive to the reputation of our agency if such a meta-evaluation were to be published. We would expect that our professionalism would minimize these concerns, but the objectivity of our meta-evaluation must be assessed with the realization that we operate within an organizational context in which multiple interests may compete.

Costs. The costs of each evaluation can be ascertained, but it is difficult to undertake a cost-benefit analysis, since ascribing dollar amounts to benefits is controversial at best. It is even more difficult to analyze an entire in-house evaluation effort, which benefits different programs and personnel in various ways and at different times; the understanding and interpretation of the benefits are part of a complex political process. Further, there are no financial supports for conducting meta-evaluations such as these in an agency setting. Perhaps the seductiveness of attempting to legitimize evaluation on a cost basis should be resisted entirely.

Technical and procedural concerns. Agency based evaluators must assure their work is of the highest standard even before embarking on the meta-evaluation process, since they remain to work with agency staff after an evaluation is over. Methodological rigor and accuracy in analysis and reporting are essential, but other concerns include:

- dealing with research competency, for example, when a poorly performing colleague is discovered;
- reconciling conflicting belief systems, in particular between researchers and administrators. In our Performance Appraisal evaluation for example, we had a vivid illustration of the importance and difficulty of developing creative strategies to enhance the researcher's negotiating position when the agency administration is the client of the evaluation;
- recognizing the difficulty of reaching agreement on evaluation plans - deciding who the consumer of the evaluation is, since the contractor is often not the individual whose power may be threatened;
- meshing conflicting personalities, not only between evaluators and program staff, but sometimes among the clinicians, whose disagreements may spill over onto the conduct of the evaluation;
- assessing the political realities in formulating recommendations, i.e., keeping your friends while conveying the bad news. (In extreme cases, data may be presented to program staff who then can be asked to write recommendations jointly with the evaluators.)

Advantages

The difficulties and constraints facing an in-house evaluator have been discussed by others (Kennedy, 1983; Caputo, 1985; Adams, 1985). They include becoming mired in routine activity and being charged with subjectivity, that

is withholding data, hiding important findings, and other examples of collusion (House, 1986). The role of internal researcher, however, also has strengths and advantages which are less frequently discussed. Fleischer (1983), for example, notes the greater likelihood of developing long-term relationships with people within the organization, which can contribute to trust and enhanced credibility of research findings; the greater knowledge of the organizational system, and the interests, skills, and concerns of its staff; and the lesser probability of appearing as a threat compared to an outsider. The "linkage" evaluation model Fleischer proposes requires such knowlege and long-term relationships. Since evaluators operate best in a climate of accommodation (Reineke and Welch, 1986), in-house researchers may have the best opportunity to establish and nurture such a working environment. They are in a position to become familiar with the language and concepts of program staff, so communication is enhanced, and are acquainted with the political and personal realities so they can formulate findings in their most useful form. Trust between research and program staff also permits the introduction of new ideas and areas of inquiry, and in that sense in-house evaluation has been an essential contribution to our agency's program planning and development. We have come to this perception inductively, having observed the insensitivities and negative affects of "objective" information from outside evaluators. Now that the "convening process" legitimizes the functions an in-house evaluator may fulfill, it may be appropriate to undertake more meta-evaluations to examine our outcomes as we expect practitioners to allow us to examine theirs. The ultimate value of research and evaluation, the spirit of inquiry engendered, can be modeled best by those engaged in the practice.

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Figure 1

Meta-Evaluation Assessments

Evaluation Project	Functions of Evaluation*			
	Measuring Achievement of Priorities	Program Change	Changing Clients/ Personnel	Sustaining Power or Structure
Child Sexual Abuse Internal evaluation of a newly funded team, including Research and outsiders, whose members did not ordinarily work together	+ Process difficult	+	+	+ Opportunity for change missed
Family Day Care Evaluation of provider turnover, along with trends in demographics	+ Macro level issues ignored	+	+	+ Explicit support sought and received
Tarasoff Needs assessment for training and procedural guidelines around clients threatening violence	+	+	+	+
Performance Appraisal Administration's request to determine staff satisfaction with a new performance appraisal system	+ Disagreement over priorities	-	-	+ Questions not permitted

+ = function fulfilled
- = function not fulfilled

*According to Sjoberg (1975)